

Cheyney, PA — Focusing on the issues of racial tensions and bullying in schools, Congressman Joe Sestak (PA-7) today took part in a panel discussion during the NAACP's Forum on Racial Tension in Schools. The panel was held as part of their 5th Annual Conference of the State of Education in Pennsylvania.

"I recently held my third education summit and one of the key issues discussed was how to make our schools a safe and supportive environment for every student," said Congressman Sestak. "The goal of America's public education system is to provide every student with a quality education that equips them to work in the global economy. If we can not ensure the safety of our students, they cannot learn, and ultimately, we fail that student not just in school, but in preparation for life."

Congressman Sestak and his staff have met with community leaders, teachers, principals, community police and students to get their perspective and ideas to improve the school environment and decrease bullying and other violence.

"Many of our regional schools celebrate diversity – for example Upper Darby is incredibly diverse," Congressman Sestak stated. "But any kind of bullying is detrimental and racial bullying is particularly abhorrent. Any type of violence is terrible."

In Congress, Congressman Sestak is a member of the Education and Labor Committee, where he is working on the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind law. The information that he has gathered through school visits and meetings with education stakeholders will play a large role in crafting legislation to support safer schools and decrease racial tension and bullying.

Congressman Sestak spoke from his background of growing up in the U.S. Navy, beginning in 1970, where there were racial tensions during the Vietnam Era and how positive leadership and standards of expectations with accountability for them brought about an atmosphere of cooperation and cohesion. He spoke of the key ingredients to deal with racial tensions and bullying, which are:

1. Established expectations, whether it's the President of the United States, the captain of the ship, principal of school or teacher in a classroom.
2. Involvement of that leader among those they lead on a close continuous basis.
3. Positive enforcement of standards and an accountable approach.
4. Constant communications to layout expectations.

Finally, from a student perspective, there must be a safe and positive environment where:

1. Students feel involved in classes and are active in extracurricular activities.
2. Teachers provide a supportive, helping, and caring atmosphere for students with a safe physical environment in our schools.
3. Conflict resolution occurs in a fair and judicious way as perceived by the students, who are also involved in a meaningful way in the decision making process.
4. Students have access to counseling services and feel that the curriculum meets their needs.

Congressman Sestak also spoke about the issues raised during a recent Education Committee hearing on dropout prevention when Members of Congress questioned panel witnesses on the problem of underreporting of student violence and crime. Part of the problem, relates to the "persistently dangerous" school label, under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, as school administrators fear backlash from parents, the community, and media. For example, during the 2003-04 school year, only 26 of the nation's 91,000 public schools were labeled "persistently dangerous." Forty-seven states and the District of Columbia proudly reported that they were home to not a single unsafe school. We must provide schools with conditions that allow schools to fully disclose incidents of violence. Additionally appropriate metrics must be put in place to ensure that the federal government can collect such data to effect policies to improve the safety in our nation's schools.

Congressman Sestak will also draw on the testimony given during a field hearing on No Child Left Behind held at Radnor High School. During the field hearing on No Child Left Behind, Congressman Sestak invited incoming Radnor Middle School Principal Anthony Stevenson to testify on safe school environments. Principal Stevenson testified:

"...The physical plant of a school is only one component of creating safe schools. The true way to create a safe school is through the school climate. School climate can be understood as the frequency and quality of interactions among and between staff, students, parents, and the community...Research shows that schools with a positive and welcoming school climate increase the likelihood that students succeed academically and socially, and helps them disengage or avoid high risk behaviors like substance abuse and violence."

In addition, Congressman Sestak has held two education summits. As a result of the discussion during the first summit, Congressman Sestak worked to incorporate parental involvement in local Head Start policy councils and to extend the eligibility of Head Start families into H.R. 1429, the Improving Head Start Act. Rep. Sestak also successfully passed an amendment he introduced to the bill which will provide up to \$10,000 in loan forgiveness for Head Start teachers. The second education summit explored the challenges facing our Higher Education system and Advanced Training programs.

Born and raised in Delaware County, former 3-star Admiral Joe Sestak served in the Navy for 31 years and now serves as the Representative from the 7th District of Pennsylvania. He led a

series of operational commands at sea, including Commander of an aircraft carrier battle group of 30 U.S. and allied ships with over 15,000 sailors and 100 aircraft that conducted operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. After 9/11, Joe was the first Director of "Deep Blue," the Navy's anti-terrorism unit that established strategic and operations policies for the "Global War on Terrorism." He served as President Clinton's Director for Defense Policy at the National Security Council in the White House, and holds a Ph.D. in Political Economy and Government from Harvard University. According to the office of the House Historian, Joe is the highest-ranking former military officer ever to serve in the U.S. House of Representatives.

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